

Part Africa

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BRASS RODS AND BEADS

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Price, two cents



“WHY do you carry so much trash?” the unsophisticated one asks of a traveler.

“Trash? These brass rods and beads? We couldn’t get on without them. The natives use these to buy wives and such things.”

The unsophisticated one begins to study African values.

Stanley soberly writes: “It requires twelve goats and three hoes in Ukerewé to purchase a wife from her parents. Sungoro, the Arab, was obliged to pay Lukongeh three hundred and fifty pounds of assorted beads and three hundred yards of good cloth before he succeeded in obtaining one of his young sisters in marriage.” But this was a high value, and equally good authority says: “A Masai woman has a market value equal to five large glass beads, while a cow is worth ten of the same.”

Brass rods are good currency. The native blacksmith takes them and fashions them into necklaces, bracelets and anklets. Very often a woman wears thirty or forty pounds of these substantial ornaments, her value increasing with their weight. Fashions vary in Africa as elsewhere, for one old traveler says: “I first used red cotton handkerchiefs as money. Then I came to the country where blue glass beads were in demand, then to the region of white beads and next to that of brass rods.”

Imagination wrestles with this new idea of values, trying in vain to adapt it to a civilized scale, and must needs wander on to the country where these grotesque ornaments are proudly worn.

Here is an African belle,—your sister and mine. She has a black face, hair that tightly curls, or is trained to stand out in defiant horns, or lie in funny knobs glued to her head with a vegetable gum. Her eyes are large, black and lustrous, with that shadow of sadness which marks the race; she has a nose far from artistic in its width, and lips whose pout is permanent! Not content with the size nature has bestowed, however, she has had a quill run through the upper lip—a hideous deformity we consider it—and a wooden pin through the ears. What are those marks on her forehead? Oh, just a little fancy work done with knife and pincers to enhance her beauty!

Around her neck is a brass collar weighing fourteen pounds, the final destiny of the “brass rod”! Iron bracelets weigh down her arms, and her anklets are twice the weight of her necklace. Her dress of native woven cloth is tied around her body and hangs to her ankles. She does not make an attractive picture. But I have neglected to mention one important bit of her decoration. Attached to her necklace is a charm. It varies in form, but hers consists of small bones and was hung around her neck when she was a baby. It was obtained of a witch doctor, and is supposed to protect her against evil spirits.

There are charms in Africa for everything,—loving, hating, buying, selling, fishing, hunting, traveling. Our friend was born into a mysterious world, and she is afraid of the powers which lurk in the air, the forests, the rivers and forest paths. So she wears this greasy amulet day and night. Her *tout ensemble*—we must admit it—is not attractive.

My young friend says: "I did enjoy studying about those lovely Japanese, but the African woman 'gets on my nerves.'" How then will it be as we continue the history of this "daughter of Ham"?

"Where are your young women?" a traveler asked, noticing only little girls and wives in the tribe. He soon discovered that a girl is sold for a wife when but twelve or thirteen years of age. Some man buys her—as truly buys her as if she were a goat—and it matters not what the market price may be in his tribe, he expects her to do his drudgery.

She builds the hut of stout bark, thatched roof, and low door. She helps make the pottery for daily use, she cultivates the land with the ever useful hoe, puts in the seed, watches its growth and in due time harvests the crop.

When she goes home at night, very weary, she prepares the second meal of the day for the family and finally lies down on a mat in her smoky, windowless hut to sleep. In all probability she may be only one of several wives, and when a man is wealthy each wife has a hut for herself and her children.

Miss Mary Kingsley, who has traveled extensively in West Africa, calls polygamy a necessary evil because "no *one* woman could take care of a husband!" Possibly this is a gentle sarcasm which a scientist dares to use who evidently cares more for African insects than for African women. But one who studies its influence upon society in the Dark Continent might venture to suggest that the gospel of self-support preached to the men would, if practised, relieve the situation.

But physical labor is not the greatest trial of our sister. Should her husband suddenly sicken and die, a terrible fate may be hers. The old witch doctor is called, his duty being to ascertain who bewitched the man and caused his death.

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Of all diabolic conceptions of the unregenerate human intellect, the "witch doctor" ranks first. He comes into the village clad in grotesque style, his head bedecked with feathers, his body hung with charms and "sacred" gewgaws. He leaps and dances, works himself into a fine frenzy, mutters incoherently, applies his tests and declares this wife of the departed to be the guilty party.

Is there no law to protect her from this stupendous fraud? Is there no father's house to which she may flee for shelter? Is there no voice to plead for mercy? *There is absolutely no relief!* Bewildered, tortured, she is given the sass-wood poison or burned at the stake and the pitiful, dwarfed life is over. And she is only twenty-three or four,—just at the age of a care-free young woman in America!

Do you ask "What is such a life worth?" *Brass rods and beads*, by man's estimate. Woman in Africa is a thing to be bought and sold, berated and beaten.

Now what is your value, daughter of the happy homeland? Estimate it carefully in the light of a tenderly protecting heaven, with your face turned upward toward a loving Father, and ask what makes the difference?

And then will you answer this question, "Do I owe anything to the girls of Africa?"

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